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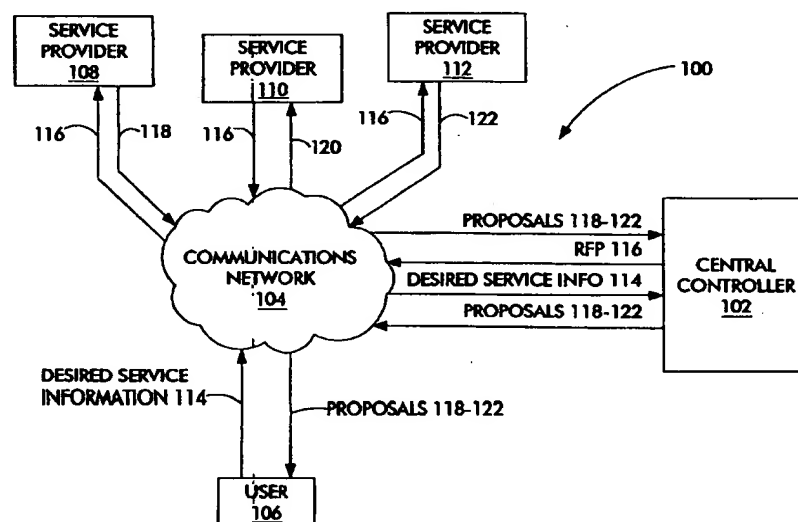
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(54) Title: COMPUTER SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR BIDDING SERVICES



(57) Abstract: A computer system and method whereby a user (106) can quickly, conveniently and anonymously peruse a preformed network of service providers (108, 110, 112) segregated by specialty and/or geographic area, select providers from which the user would like to receive proposals, submit details regarding the desired service for incorporation into a request for proposal ("RFP") that is made available to each service provider selected by the user, and then receive proposals from the service providers in response to the RFP. In this manner, the system and method of the present invention can be used to create competition amongst a number of service providers for providing the user with the desired service, thereby assisting the user in identifying the best provider of such service as determined by the user according to price and/or other factors.



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COMPUTER SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR BIDDING SERVICES**CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION**

Priority is hereby claimed under copending provisional application number 60/135,195 filed May 21, 1999, the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally a computer system and method for bidding services and, more particularly, to a computer system and method for assisting a user with preparing and sending a request for proposal ("RFP") corresponding to a service desired by the user to a plurality of potential service providers, and for collecting and providing to the user proposals received from the service providers in response to the RFP.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Everyday, people seek out and pay for the services of others including, for example, plumbing services, automobile repair services, and medical services, to name but a few. Frequently, an individual in need of a specific service will contact a prospective provider of that service to describe the nature and details of the desired service as a prerequisite to obtaining an upfront cost estimate. Before deciding to proceed with that service provider, the individual may want to ensure that he is getting the "best price" or a "good deal." To do so, however, requires the individual to invest additional time and energy to identify and contact additional service providers and then describe once again to each provider the nature and details of the desired service. The inherent inconvenience of this approach to obtaining bids or proposals for a desired service can, by itself, dissuade an individual from shopping around. Consequently, the individual may pay more or receive a lower quality than he should for a given service.

In the professional services arena, which includes medical, legal, financial, and information technology ("IT") services, the problems described above can become particularly acute. First of all, it is often difficult to even identify a service professional that can provide a particular type of specialty service. Further, obtaining an upfront cost estimate for the specialty service may require an individual to make an appointment with the service professional, and such an appointment may not be available to the user for an extended period of time. Also, the amount of information required for a professional service provider to prepare a cost proposal may be relatively greater than that required for certain non-professional services, and this also translates into a greater expenditure of time and energy on the part of the individual. Further still, many individuals are simply not comfortable meeting with what they regard as strangers to divulge private information related to, for example, a legal or medical need. For all these reasons, obtaining cost proposals from professional service providers is often difficult at best, and this may prevent many individuals from contacting more than one, if any, professional service providers when a need arises.

In view of the above, the inventor hereof has recognized a need for a more convenient and expedited approach to obtaining proposals from service providers of all types, and particularly those in the area of professional services.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In order to solve these and other needs, the inventor hereof has succeeded at designing and developing a computer system and method whereby a user can quickly, conveniently and anonymously peruse a preformed network of service providers segregated by specialty and/or geographic area, select providers from which the user would like to receive proposals, submit details regarding the desired service for incorporation into a request for proposal ("RFP") that is made available to each service provider selected by the user, and then receive

proposals from the service providers in response to the RFP. In this manner, the system and method of the present invention can be used to create competition among a number of service providers for providing the user with the desired service, thereby assisting the user in identifying the best provider of such service as determined by the user according to price and/or other factors. The ability of users to obtain such proposals without having their identity revealed to service providers, coupled with other advantages discussed herein, render the present invention especially well suited for users to obtain bids from professional service providers, including doctors, lawyers, accountants, bankers, investors, IT service providers, etc.

In accordance with one aspect of the present invention, a computerized method for facilitating a transaction between a user desiring a service and at least one of a plurality of service providers comprises the steps of identifying the service desired by the user, providing an RFP corresponding to the desired service to the plurality of service providers, receiving proposals from the plurality of service providers in response to the RFP, and providing the received proposals to the user whereby the user may accept one of the proposals to initiate a transaction. The identifying step preferably includes providing a list from which the desired service can be selected by the user. Preferably, this list includes a plurality of services in each of a plurality of service areas and, even more preferably, includes a plurality of specialty services in each of a plurality of professional service areas. The providing step preferably includes providing the RFP only to service providers servicing a geographic region selected by the user. The method may also comprise the step of concealing the identity of the user from the plurality of service providers. The method is preferably implemented using a central controller in a distributed computer network, such as the Internet, to which the user and the plurality of service providers are connected. The method may also comprise the step of providing the user with a list of the service

providers, and this list may include credentials for the service providers arranged according to a standardized format, as well as ratings of the service providers by prior users and computer links to additional information regarding the service providers. Preferably, the RFP is provided only to registered service providers, and only to registered service providers selected by the user. The proposals received from the service providers are preferably sealed proposals in the sense that they are shared only with the user and not with other service providers. The method preferably comprises the additional step of providing the service providers with a deadline for submitting the proposals in response to the RFP, and this deadline is preferably determined by the user. The method may also comprise the step of enabling the user to communicate anonymously with the service providers. The RFP is preferably prepared using information obtained from the user, and this information is preferably obtained by providing the user with a questionnaire specific to the desired service. Details regarding the user and/or the service desired by the user are preferably obtained from the user and included in the RFP. The received proposals are preferably forwarded to the user via email, and preferably as they are received from the service providers. The RFP may be provided to the service providers via a web site, and the method may also comprise the step of notifying the plurality of service providers via email when the RFP is accessible to the service providers via the web site.

In accordance with another aspect of the present invention, a method for using a computer system to facilitate a transaction between a user desiring a service and a service provider comprises the steps of providing the user with a list of service providers, accepting a selection by the user of at least one of the service providers from which the user desires to receive a proposal, and providing an RFP corresponding to the service desired by the user to the selected service provider. Preferably, the RFP is provided exclusively to the selected service provider. The accepting step may also

include accepting a selection by the user of a plurality of the service providers from which the user desires to receive proposals and the RFP may be provided exclusively to the plurality of selected service providers. The method may also
5 comprise the steps of limiting the number of service providers that can be selected by the user, and facilitating preparation of the RFP by the user.

In accordance with still another aspect of the present invention, a method for using a computer system to facilitate
10 a transaction between a user desiring a service and at least one of a plurality of service providers comprises the steps of identifying the service desired by the user, providing an RFP corresponding to the desired service to the plurality of service providers, and enabling the user to communicate with
15 at least one of the plurality of service providers through the computer system without disclosing the identity of the user to said one service provider. Preferably, the enabling step includes enabling the user to communicate with the plurality of service providers through the computer system without
20 disclosing the identity of the user to the service providers. A deadline may also be provided for the service providers to submit the proposals in response to the RFP and the enabling step preferably includes enabling the user to communicate with the plurality of service providers through the computer system
25 until the proposal deadline expires without disclosing the identity of the user to the service providers.

While some of the principal features and advantages of the invention have been described above, a greater and more thorough understanding of the invention can be attained by
30 referring to the drawings and the detailed description of the preferred embodiments provided below.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 is a block diagram of a preferred computer system according to one embodiment of the present invention.

35 Fig. 2 is a block diagram of the preferred central controller shown in Fig. 1.

Fig. 3 and 4 are a flow chart of the functions performed in a preferred implementation of the invention in the field of professional services.

Fig. 5 illustrates an exemplary list of professional service areas that can be selected by a user.

Fig. 6 illustrates an exemplary drop list from which the user can selected a geographic region supported by the computer system.

Fig. 7 illustrates an exemplary list of service specialties that can be selected by the user.

Figs. 8(a) and 8(b) illustrate a list of registered service providers that be selected by the user to receive an RFP.

Figs. 9(a) and 9(b) illustrate an exemplary questionnaire that is provided to the user to facilitate preparation of an RFP for a cosmetic surgery service.

Corresponding reference characters indicate corresponding features throughout the drawings.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

A preferred computer system according to one embodiment of the present invention is shown in Fig. 1 and is indicated generally by reference character 100. As shown therein, the system 100 includes a central controller 102 connected to a communications network 104 through which the central controller 102 can communicate with both a user 106 in need of a particular service and a plurality of service providers 108, 110, 112. The communications network 104 may be any type of wired or wireless communications network, and is preferably a distributed computer network such as the Internet. The central controller 102 is preferably configured for hosting a web site designed to implement the methods described herein.

As illustrated generally in Fig. 1, the user 106 may provide desired service information 114 via a personal computer or other communication device to the central controller 102 via the communications network 104. The desired service information 114 may represent a selection by

the user 106 of a particular service from a list of services that are supported by and stored within the central controller 102 and displayed to the user, at least in part, via the web site. The desired service information 114 may also include
5 certain details that are needed by the service providers 108-112 to bid on the service desired by the user. Using the desired service information 114, the central controller 102 may produce a corresponding request for proposal ("RFP") 116 which it then forwards to a personal computer or other
10 communication device of each of the service providers 108-112. Thus, all of the service providers are preferably provided the same information regarding the service desired by the user, and this information is preferably made available to all of the service providers at the same time. In response to the
15 RFP 116, the service providers may each submit to the central controller 102 a proposal 118, 120, 122 that includes an estimate of what the service provider would charge the user for the desired service. In one preferred embodiment, the service providers are only limited by space with respect to
20 the amount of information in addition to the cost estimate which can be included in the proposal, and each proposal includes information about the level of quality or efficiency at which the service provider would render the desired service. Either as the proposals arrive or after a number of
25 them have been received, the central controller 102 forwards the proposals 118-122 to the user 106 for the user's review and consideration. In this manner, the user 106 may readily and conveniently obtain proposals from multiple service providers without having to independently identify, contact
30 and then explain to each and every service provider the details of the service desired by the user.

Throughout the process described generally above, the identity of the user may be concealed from the service providers by, for example, "identifying" the user in the RFP
35 116 using a user identifier ("ID") that can be associated with the user only by the central controller 102. This is preferably done for at least two reasons. First, if the

identity of the user was disclosed to the service providers, one or more of the service providers may contact the user directly such as by phone to personally solicit the user's business, thereby circumventing and perhaps impairing the usefulness of the system 100. Second, some potential users may be reluctant to request proposals for certain types of services such as, for example, cosmetic surgery services, if they cannot do so with anonymity. In one preferred implementation, the identity of the user is concealed from the service providers indefinitely. Thus, it is the user's responsibility to independently contact (such as by phone, fax or in person) and follow up with the "best" provider (as determined solely by the user) of those that submitted proposals. Preferably, the user is not required to accept any one of the proposals.

Ideally, the RFP 116 that is made available to the service providers 108-112 will include all information needed by the service providers to prepare the proposals 118-122. In reality, however, there may be times when one or more of the service providers will require additional information before a proposal can be made. For this reason, the preferred system and method allows the service providers to communicate with the user during the proposal process, but only through the central controller 102 in such a manner as to maintain the user's anonymity, as further described below.

In one preferred embodiment of the invention, also described further below, the user is provided with a list of providers and is permitted to choose the particular service providers to which the RFP 118 will be provided, thereby allowing the user to immediately eliminate certain providers from further consideration and limit the overall number of proposals that the user can expect to receive.

Although only three exemplary service providers 108-112 are shown in Fig. 1, it should be understood that a large number of providers for a wide variety of services can be supported by the preferred system 100. Similarly, the preferred system 100 is configured to support contemporaneous

access by a large number of "users" each seeking to independently obtain proposals for a particular service.

As shown in Fig. 2, the preferred central controller 102 for communicating with devices of the service providers and users includes at least one central processor unit ("CPU") 200, a memory device 202, a clock 206, a network interface 208, and a data storage device 210. The central controller 102 may be, for example, a conventional personal computer or computer workstation with sufficient memory and processing capability for operating as a web server. The memory device 202 may include static and dynamic memory components. The data storage device 210 may be any suitable storage device, such as a hard disk, CD-ROM, flash memory, etc. The preferred data storage device 210 includes several databases including a user database 212, a provider database 214, an available services database 216, a questionnaire database 218, an RFP database 220, a proposal database 222 and a communications database 224. Within the user database 212 is preferably stored a profile for each registered user which may include the user's name, address, phone number, and email address as well as a unique user ID and password that were assigned to or selected by the user when registering with the system 100. Preferably, each user must provide his or her unique ID and password before the system will forward an RFP for that user to one or more service providers. Within the provider database 214 is preferably stored a profile for each registered service provider which may include the service provider's name, address, phone number, email address, web URL, credentials, service specialties, and geographic service area as well as a unique provider ID and password that were assigned to or selected by the service provider when registering with the system 100. Preferably, each service provider must provide his or her unique ID and password before the system will provide RFPs to or receive proposals from that service provider.

Stored within the available services database 216 is a list of all services supported by the system 100. This list

is preferably sorted first according to several general service areas, and then by geographic region, and then by specific services that belong to a particular service area and that are available in a particular geographic region.

5 However, this information can be arranged and processed in numerous other ways, as apparent to those skilled in the art. Within the questionnaire database 218 is preferably stored a standard form or questionnaire for each specific service supported by the system.

10 Stored within the RFP database 220 is a profile for each RFP handled by the system 100. Each RFP profile preferably includes the date on which the RFP was prepared and made available to service providers, an RFP control number that is assigned by the system, the ID of the user responsible for
15 this RFP, the provider ID for each provider to which the RFP was made available and the RFP itself. In one preferred embodiment, the form questionnaire that is completed and returned to the central controller by the user constitutes the RFP that is forwarded to the service providers to elicit the
20 proposals. Alternatively, the RFPs can be produced or assembled independently by the central controller using, for example, information obtained from the user via a form questionnaire or otherwise.

25 Preferably stored within the proposal database 222 is a profile for each proposal received from a service provider. This profile may include the date the proposal was received by the system, a proposal control number that is assigned by the system, the provider ID for the provider of the proposal, the control number of the RFP related to this proposal, and the
30 various information including text information that represents the proposal, preferably including a cost estimate for the desired service and information about how or when the service would be rendered, the level of quality or efficiency at which the service would be rendered, etc. The communications
35 database 224 is preferably provided for storing any and all communications between users and service providers, as explained further below.

As may already be apparent, the preferred system and method of the present invention is particularly well suited for users seeking proposals for professional services including medical, legal, financial, and IT services. This is because it is often difficult for an individual to even identify professionals that are capable of rendering the desired service, and it may be even more difficult for the individual to call, make an appointment, and then meet with the professional service provider (who may not be located in the same geographic region as the user) to explain the nature of the particular service desired before receiving some indication of the estimated cost and expected outcome. Thus, in some cases, it may take several days or even several weeks or months for an individual to obtain a cost estimate and other relevant information from a single service provider. For these and perhaps other reasons, individuals are believed to "shop around" for professional services to a much lesser extent than for non-professional services such as travel or lodging services, temporary employment services, painting services, etc. Further, it is in the area of professional services that individuals tend to be most discrete and may be reluctant to disclose their needs to even one much less several professional service providers. The preferred system and method overcome these problems by enabling users to conveniently, readily and anonymously obtain proposals from multiple professional service providers.

A preferred implementation of the present invention in the field of professional services will now be described with reference to the flow chart shown in Figs. 3 and 4. Referring to block 300 in Fig. 3, a user may first register with the system (if he or she hasn't already done so) and then log in to the system using the user ID and password that are preferably assigned to the user during the registration process. Processing then continues at block 302 where a list of professional service areas is displayed to the user. An exemplary list is shown in Fig. 5 and preferably includes a medical services button 502, a legal services button 504 and a

financial services button 506. Processing then continues at block 304 in Fig. 3 where the user selects one of these professional service areas by selecting the appropriate graphical button. Processing then continues to block 306 where a list of geographical regions supported by the system is displayed to the user. These geographic regions may be defined, for example, in terms of cities, where the list includes the names of numerous cities that can be selected by the user. The list of supported geographic regions is preferably a drop list 602 of the type shown in Fig. 6. In cases where the desired service can be efficiently rendered by service providers in different geographic regions than the user, block 306 is preferably omitted.

With further reference to Fig. 3, once a geographic region has been selected by the user in block 308, processing continues to block 310 where a list of service specialties is displayed to the user. This list is preferably limited to those service specialties belonging to the professional service area selected by the user in block 304 and supported by the system in the geographic region selected by the user in block 308. An example of such a list is shown in Fig. 7.

Once the user selects the service specialty of interest in block 312 of Fig. 3, processing continues to block 314 where a list is displayed of the registered service providers that are capable of providing, in the geographic region selected by the user in block 308, the service specialty selected by the user in block 312. An example of such a list is shown in Figs. 8(a) and 8(b). Preferably, this list includes credentials for each listed service provider, such as educational degrees by institution and date, professional licenses, professional memberships, special training, specialized experience, etc. Further, the credentials of each service provider are preferably arranged according to a standardized format, thereby allowing users to more readily compare the credentials of multiple service providers. The list of service providers may also include computer links to additional information about the service providers. Further,

this list may include a rating of some kind for each provider such as, for example, an average of several ratings of the service provider by prior users on a scale of one to ten.

At block 316, the user preferably selects one or more of the service providers listed for the user in block 314. In this particular implementation of the invention, the user can preferably select no more than seven service providers to receive any given RFP. At block 318 shown in Fig. 4, a questionnaire is provided to the user. Preferably, this questionnaire is specific to the service specialty selected by the user in block 312 and is designed to elicit all information about the user and/or the desired service that providers will need to prepare their proposals. An example of such a questionnaire for a user seeking cosmetic surgery services is shown in Figs. 9(a) and 9(b), and includes certain mandatory fields (designated by an asterisk) that must be completed by the user before an RFP can be finalized. Preferably, this questionnaire allows the user to select a "bid deadline," which is the deadline by which proposals must be submitted, if at all, by the service providers. This deadline can be determined by the user using, for example, a drop list 902 of the type shown in Fig. 9(b). In this particular implementation, the user can select a bid deadline between a minimum of three days and a maximum of seven days.

At block 320 in Fig. 4, the questionnaire that was provided to and then completed by the user is received back by the central controller and, in this preferred embodiment, constitutes the RFP that will be forwarded to the service providers. Alternatively, the user could simply provide the system with, for example, a text description of the service desired, and the RFP could include the user's text description in lieu of a completed questionnaire. However, using a questionnaire tailored to the service specialty desired by the user is believed to be more convenient for the user and helps to ensure that all information needed by the service providers to prepare their proposals will be obtained from the user. Regardless of how information regarding the desired service is

obtained from the user, it should be recognized that, in this preferred embodiment, the RFP is essentially prepared by the user and the preferred system merely facilitates such preparation.

5 At block 322 shown in Fig. 4, the RFP is provided to the particular service provider(s) selected by the user in block 316. Preferably, this RFP identifies the user by user ID (if at all) and not by name so as to conceal the identity of the user from the service providers. It is also preferable that
10 the RFP does not identify which or how many service providers are receiving the RFP. As a result, each service provider may assume that their proposal will be competing with those of many other service providers, which may or may not be the case depending upon the number of service providers selected by the
15 user in block 316. The RFP is preferably made available to the selected service provider(s) by posting the RFP to each provider's account in the web site hosted by the central controller 102. At the same time, electronic notices may be sent to the user to confirm that the RFP has been made
20 available to the selected service providers. Electronic notices may also be sent to the selected service providers to inform each of them that the RFP is available for review from their account. Alternatively, the RFP itself could be forwarded to the selected service providers via email or by
25 any other suitable means.

 In this preferred embodiment, the service providers to which the RFP is made available are permitted to communicate with the user (in such a manner as to preserve the user's anonymity) until the proposal deadline has expired. Thus, at
30 block 324, a decision is made as to whether a request for additional information has been received from one of the service providers by the central controller. If no such request has been received, processing branches to block 330 described below. If such a request has been received,
35 processing continues to block 326 where the request is preferably sent to the user so the user may reply by providing the requested information. At block 328, the user's reply is

preferably forwarded to all of the selected service providers, rather than to just the service provider that requested the additional information. This is preferably done for at least two reasons. First, providing the user's reply to all selected service providers is believed to "even the playing field," as all service providers will have the same information (i.e., the original RFP and the additional information provided subsequent to the RFP by the user) upon which to base their proposals. Additionally, the additional information that was requested by one service provider may ultimately be needed by all of the service providers to prepare their proposals. Thus, by promptly forwarding the user's reply to all selected service providers, similar requests by other service providers may be preempted. Additionally, by monitoring the service providers' requests for additional information, one can determine whether the questionnaire originally provided to the user should be revised to request additional or different information so as to reduce the volume of similar requests in the future.

At block 330, any and all proposals received from the selected service providers in response to the RFP are preferably made available to the user as they are received. This can be done by posting the proposals in the user's account in the web site hosted by the central controller 102. At the same time, electronic notices may be sent to the user to advise that one or more proposals have been received and made available to the user. Alternatively, or additionally, the proposals can be forwarded to the user via email. As noted above, each proposal is preferably made available to the user as soon as it is received and processed by the central controller. Alternatively, the central controller can be configured to hold the proposals until a predefined number of proposals are received, or until the proposal deadline has expired. In this particular implementation, the providers are not permitted to review one another's proposals, and these proposals may therefore be referred to herein as "sealed proposals."

At block 332, a decision is made regarding whether the proposal deadline has expired. If it has not expired, processing loops back to block 324 and then continues as described above. If the proposal deadline has expired, processing continues to block 334 where the user and/or the service providers are notified that the deadline has expired and the process has been completed. At this point in the processing, the preferred system may also request the user to disclose which proposal, if any, was deemed the winning proposal by the user (on the basis of price and/or other factors), but the user is preferably not required to provide this information. Preferably, whether the user independently contacts any of the selected service providers, without further assistance from the system 100, to officially accept or follow up on a particular proposal is entirely within the user's discretion.

Although a particular embodiment of the invention in the field of professional services has been described above, it should be recognized that the teachings of the present invention are not so limited, and can also be applied to trade and other non-professional services including, for example, home repair or remodeling services, automobile repair services, etc.

As various changes could be made in the above-described systems and methods without departing from the scope of the invention, all matter contained in the above description and shown in the accompanying drawings shall be interpreted as illustrative and not in a limiting sense.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A computerized method for facilitating a transaction between a user desiring a service and at least one of a plurality of service providers, the method comprising the steps of:

- 5 identifying the service desired by the user;
 providing an RFP corresponding to the desired service to the plurality of service providers;
 receiving proposals from the plurality of service providers in response to the RFP; and
10 providing the received proposals to the user whereby the user may accept one of the proposals to initiate a transaction.

2. The computerized method of claim 1 wherein the identifying step includes providing a list from which the desired service can be selected by the user.

3. The computerized method of claim 2 wherein said list includes a plurality of services in each of a plurality of service areas.

4. The computerized method of claim 3 wherein said list includes a plurality of specialty services in each of a plurality of professional service areas.

5. The computerized method of claim 2 wherein the providing step includes providing the RFP only to service providers servicing a geographic region selected by the user.

6. The computerized method of claim 5 further comprising the step of concealing the identity of the user from the plurality of service providers.

7. The computerized method of claim 6 wherein the method is implemented using a central controller in a distributed computer network to which the user and the plurality of service providers are connected.
8. The computerized method of claim 1 further comprising the step of providing the user with a list of the plurality of service providers.
9. The computerized method of claim 8 wherein the list includes credentials arranged according to a standardized format for each of the plurality of service providers.
10. The computerized method of claim 9 wherein the list includes a link to additional information for each of the plurality of service providers.
11. The computerized method of claim 9 wherein the list includes ratings for the plurality of service providers.
12. The computerized method of claim 1 further comprising the step of providing the RFP only to registered service providers.
13. The computerized method of claim 12 further comprising the step of providing the RFP only to registered service providers selected by the user.
14. The computerized method of claim 1 wherein the proposals are sealed proposals such that each service provider proposal is withheld from the other service providers.
15. The computerized method of claim 1 further comprising the step of providing the plurality of service providers with a deadline for submitting the proposals in response to the RFP.

16. The computerized method of claim 15 wherein the proposal deadline is determined by the user.

17. The computerized method of claim 16 further comprising the step of enabling the user to communicate anonymously with the plurality of service providers.

18. The computerized method of claim 1 further comprising the step of preparing the RFP using information obtained from the user.

19. The computerized method of claim 18 wherein the obtaining step includes providing the user with a questionnaire specific to the desired service.

20. The computerized method of claim 1 further comprising the step of forwarding the received proposals to the user via email.

21. The computerized method of claim 20 wherein the received proposals are forwarded to the user as they are received from the plurality of service providers.

22. The computerized method of claim 1 wherein the RFP is provided to the plurality of service providers via a web site, the method further comprising the step of notifying the plurality of service providers via email when the RFP is accessible to the service providers via the web site.

23. A method for using a computer system to facilitate a transaction between a user desiring a service and a service provider, the method comprising the steps of:

providing the user with a list of service providers;

accepting a selection by the user of at least one of the service providers from which the user desires to receive a proposal; and

providing an RFP corresponding to the service desired by the user to the selected service provider.

24. The method of claim 23 wherein the RFP is provided exclusively to the selected service provider.

25. The method of claim 24 wherein the accepting step includes accepting a selection by the user of a plurality of the service providers from which the user desires to receive proposals and the RFP is provided exclusively to the plurality
5 of selected service providers.

26. The method of claim 25 further comprising the step of limiting the number of service providers that can be selected by the user.

27. The method of claim 23 further comprising the step of facilitating preparation of the RFP by the user.

28. A method for using a computer system to facilitate a transaction between a user desiring a service and at least one of a plurality of service providers, the method comprising the steps of:

5 identifying the service desired by the user;
providing an RFP corresponding to the desired service to the plurality of service providers; and
enabling the user to communicate with at least one of the plurality of service providers through the computer system
10 without disclosing the identity of the user to said one service provider.

29. The method of claim 28 wherein the enabling step includes enabling the user to communicate with the plurality of service providers through the computer system without disclosing the identity of the user to the service providers.

30. The method of claim 29 wherein a deadline is provided for the service providers to submit the proposals in response to the RFP and the enabling step includes enabling the user to communicate with the plurality of service providers through
5 the computer system until the proposal deadline expires without disclosing the identity of the user to the service providers.

FIG. 1

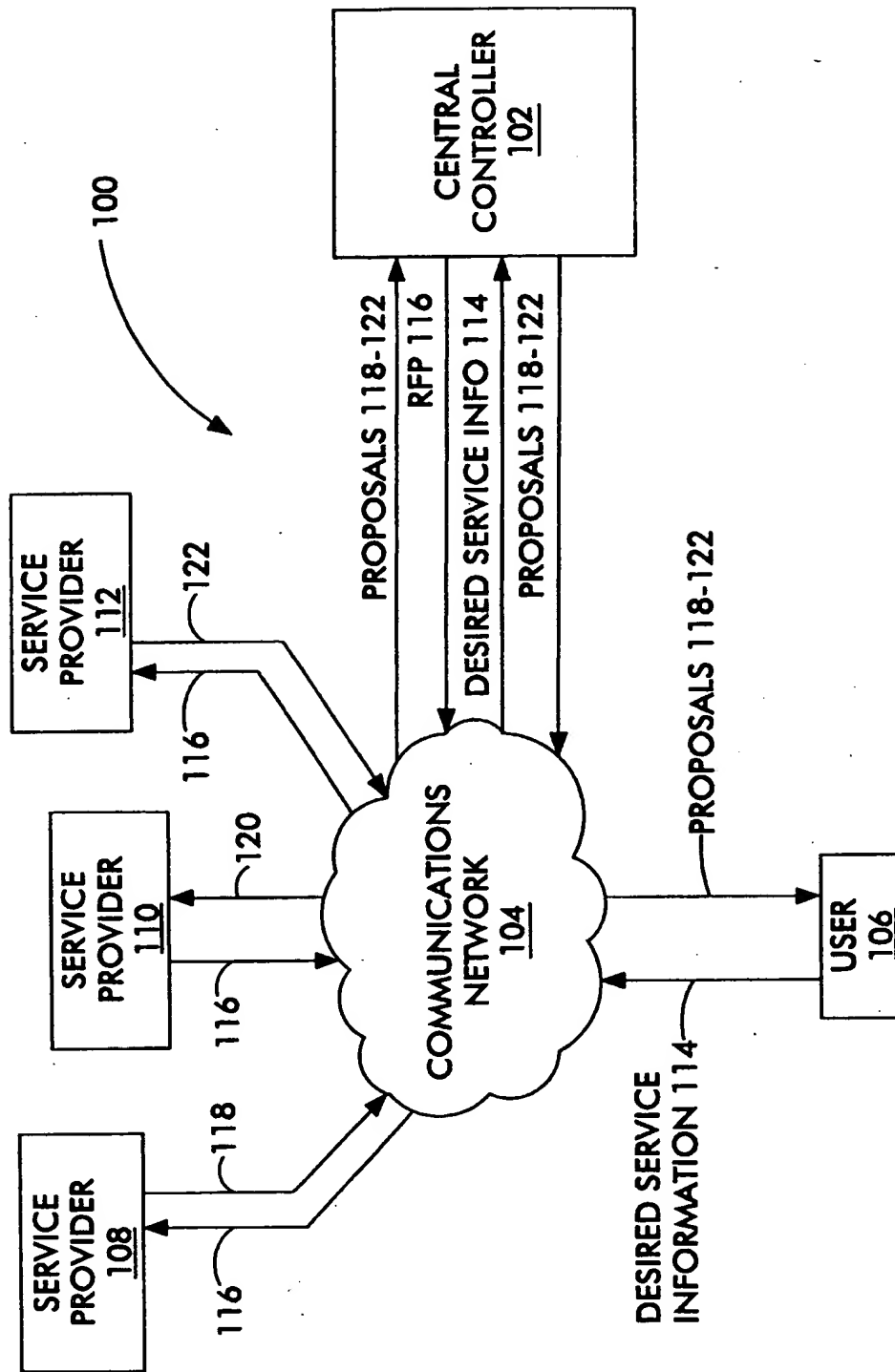


FIG. 2

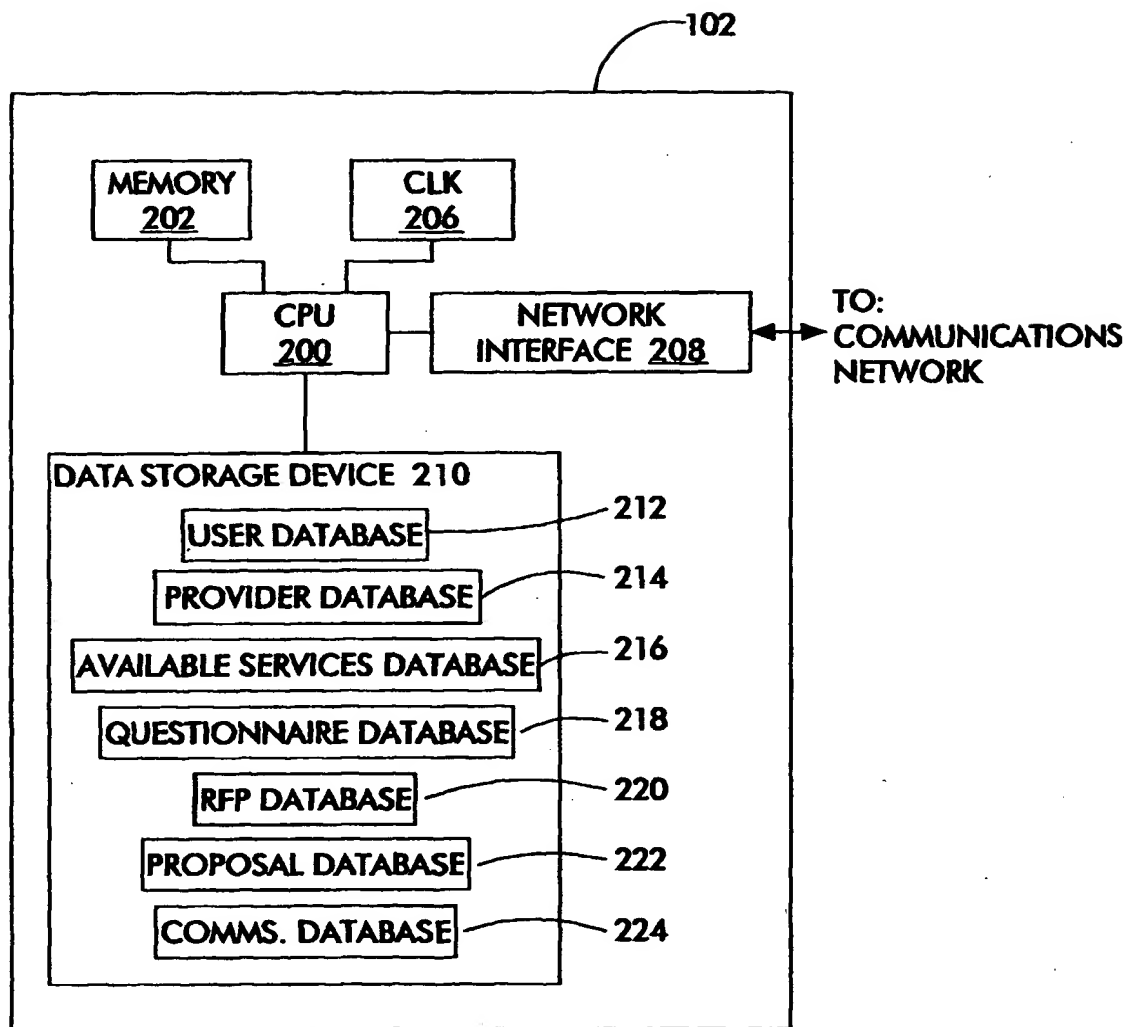
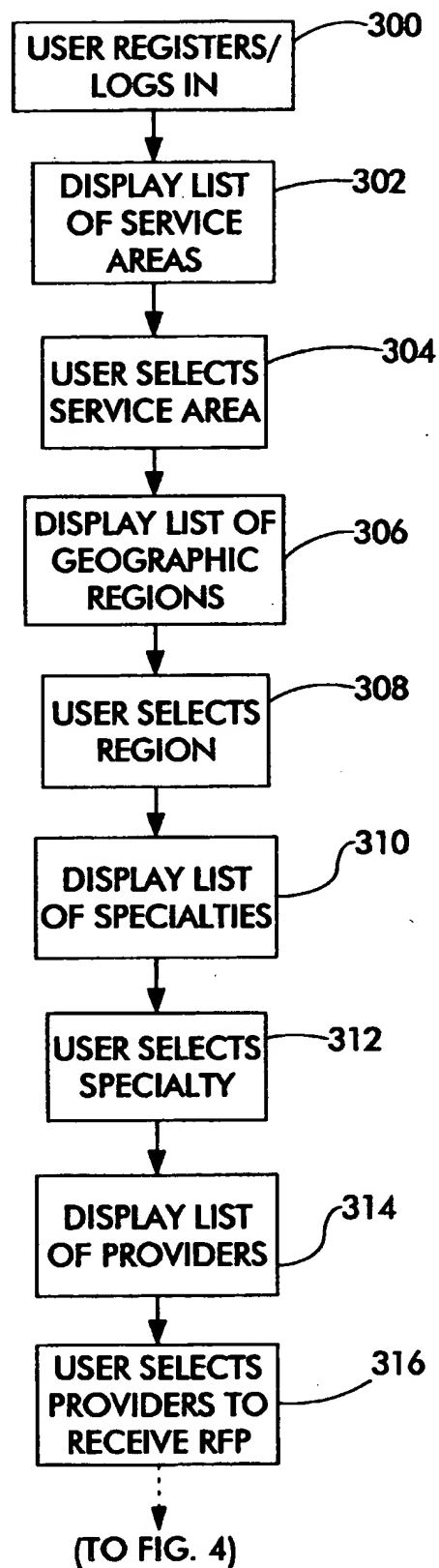


FIG. 3



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FIG. 4

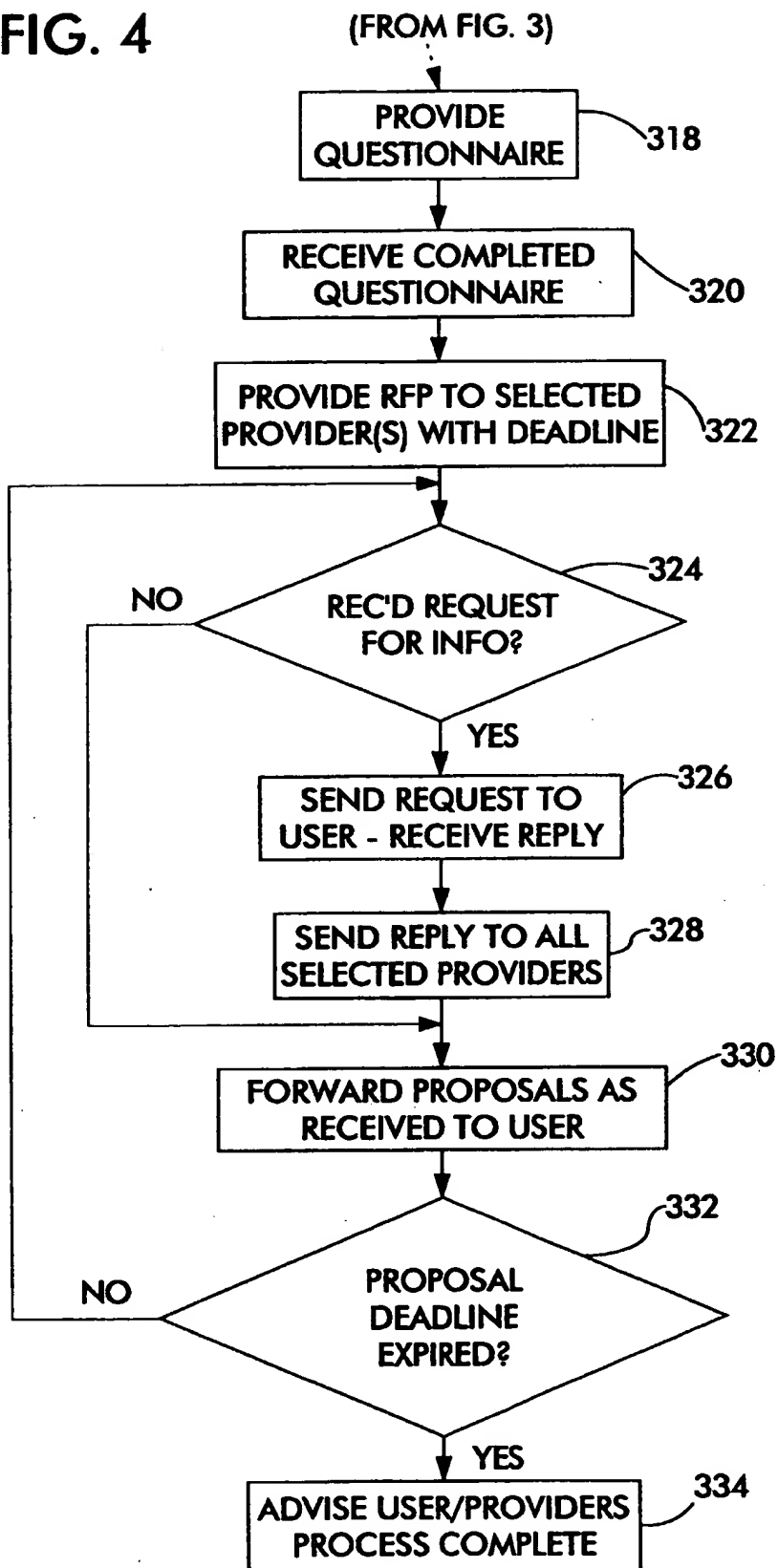





FIG. 5


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FIG. 6


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FIG. 8A

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Leon I Edelson
Law Office of Leon I. Edelson
39 S. LaSalle Street
Suite 1120
Chicago, IL 60603
312.849.3333

Degrees: LLM with Honors Intellectual Property John Marshall Law School 1994; JD Georgetown Univ. Law Center 1988; CCP Computer Science DePaul Univ. BA Indiana Univ. 1980.
Certifications: US Supreme Court, Patent Bar; US Federal Circuit Seventh Circuit; N.D. of Illinois General.
Concentration: Intellectual Property; Patents, Trademarks, Copyrights, Tradeseecrets; Computer Law, Licensing, Intellectual Property Audits, Litigation, Corporate Formation.
Qualifications: ISBA Intellectual Property Section Vice-Chair ISBA Intellectual Property Patent Subcommittee Chair; IPLAC Vice-Chair Tradeseecrets Committee AIPLA, LES, ABA, CBA, LCBA, DCBA, WSBA, NSBA
Decalogue Society; Inn of Courts.

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Degrees: Kurt A. Wagner, BS, MBA (Finance), JD Magna cum Laude, Southern Illinois University.
Certifications: Kurt A. Wagner, Illinois and Washington, DC.
Concentration: Kurt A. Wagner: International business transactions, trademarks and commercial law.
Qualifications: Firm has office in Europe at: Law & Consulting Offices of Kurt A. Wagner; Moritschstrasse 2/1 A-9500 Villach, Austria; Tel. 011-43-4242-24 0 42; and representative office in Vienna, Austria.
Web Site: <http://firms.findlaw.com/uslawyer>

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Degrees: Pharmacy B.S. (1991), Ferris State University College of Business; J.D. (1995), John Marshall Law School.
Certifications: Chicago Bar Association; American Bar Association
Concentration: FDA; FTC; Regulatory Compliance and Litigation involving Foods, Drugs, and Dietary Supplements; Trademark and Copyright Filing and Litigation; Internet and Information Technology Law; and Distributor and Licensing Agreements.
Web Site: <http://www.weaveramin.com>

FIG. 8B

Frances M Wiet Makuch
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Chicago, IL 60601
312-704-3561

Degrees: JD, Loyola University Chicago School of Law

Certifications: Admitted to practice law in Illinois.

Concentration: Broad-based transactional experience from initial public offerings to private offerings including creation of memoranda provided to prospective investors and federal and state filings. My client base is broad from start-up e-commerce businesses to well-established businesses seeking to raise capital. I also have significant experience in bond work.

Qualifications: Advanced Masters in International Management from the American Graduate School of International Management.

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FIG. 9B

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US00/13672

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(7) : G06F 17/60

US CL : 705/37

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

U.S. : 705/37, 1, 26, 27, 74, 7, 8

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

STN

search terms: RFP, RFQ, request for quote, request for proposal, conditional purchase offer, anonymous

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	US 5,794,207 A (WALKER et al) 11 August 1998, see the abstract, figs. 1, 2, 5, 10.	1-30
A	US 5,802,493 A (SHEFLOTT et al) 01 September 1998, see the abstract.	1-30
A	US 5,758,328 A (GIOVANNOLI) 26 May 1998, see the abstract.	1-30
A	US 5,799,151 A (HOFFER) 25 August 1998, see the abstract.	1-30
A	US 5,826,244 A (HUBERMAN) 20 October 1998, see the abstract, figs. 3A-3B.	1-30
A	US 5,765,138 A (AYCOCK et al) 09 June 1998, see the abstract.	1-30

☐ Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.
 ☐ See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents:	*T* later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention
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Date of the actual completion of the international search

27 AUGUST 2000

Date of mailing of the international search report

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